

Maximizing Prudence in International Relations

Written by Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman

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FRANCIS A. BEER AND ROBERT HARIMAN, FEB 12 2013

The mentality known variously as *phronêsis*, *prudentia*, prudence, or practical wisdom has become a topic of renewed interest in International Relations. For example, a recent article by David McCourt asks, what counts as *phronêsis* in world politics, and how can it be nurtured by scholars and other international knowledge producers?[i] In addition, he suggests that pluralism should be seen as an important resource for developing prudent policy-makers. These claims resonate with ongoing discussions in the discipline regarding the conduct of inquiry, the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives into official decision-making, and even a rehabilitation of classical realism following experiences in Iraq.[ii]

What is Prudence?

Our own work on prudence and the need for a more rhetorical conception of international politics directly supports such calls for taking seriously the distinctive characteristics of political judgment.[iii] We find, however, that discussions of prudence have been too narrow. Scholars are averse to the seemingly simplistic maxims that are used by political actors on the ground, and they are understandably drawn to Aristotle's acute formulation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *phronêsis* is carefully articulated as a mode of reasoning having its own standards, procedures, and problems. One unintended consequence of these academic preferences is that those wanting to promote prudence cut themselves off from important resources. For example, Aristotle's conception can be broadened by reference to his works on politics and rhetoric, and additionally—as was the case in antiquity—through attention to the more explicitly rhetorical tradition that runs from Isocrates through Cicero to the Italian renaissance and beyond. Likewise, the talk of foreign policy practitioners reveals not merely that they don't sound like journal articles, but that the prudential mentality is carried in part through their commonplaces of speech and thought. Thus, instead of scientific hypotheses or laws, we find practical rules of thumb; instead of general theories, we find mentors and maxims; and, instead of overarching principles or doctrines, we find cases and analogies.

Of course, political actors in the international arena typically are well-educated, sophisticated, and immersed in fields of discourse that require awareness of larger theories and empirical research in conflict and cooperation, trade and development, decision-making and rationality, area studies, and the like. The key contribution of the literature on prudence is not to add another set of ideas or skills or beliefs to this mix. Indeed, prudence is not really about knowledge. Instead, the goal is to produce the *reflective practitioner*. This prudential actor is someone capable of working midway between habitual practice and context-independent theory. The prudential actor doesn't rely on intuition alone, although that is adequate for many ordinary activities, nor on the extended arguments of scholarly discussion, although they can provide important resources for decision-making. Prudence requires acting in time but with more deliberation than is needed simply to react.

As we summarize this mentality, prudence involves attention to character, culture, and other situational constraints in order to balance incommensurable goods to achieve mutual advantage through successful performance. At the same time, we believe that definitions of prudence are of limited value in capturing how prudence actually works. Any formulation does need to be grounded in an account of the basic conditions for political decision-making and choice, which is why the Aristotelian formulation is so useful. Thus, prudence is the mode of reasoning about contingent matters in order to select the best course of action. Contingent events cannot be known with certainty, and actions are intelligible only with regard to some idea of what is good. As such matters always are subject to dispute, they can

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be resolved rationally only through deliberation – that is, through talk that involves reciprocal exposition, comparison, and evaluation of arguments that represent competing perspectives or purposes. Likewise, analysis of how others might act and determination of one's objectives each require consideration of what is good in general. Therefore, prudence is the determination of what is good for both the individual and others. Since it must culminate in action, prudence also includes the determination of how to achieve these linked ends in the particular case. Thus, prudence requires knowledge of particulars that can only be acquired through experience, and this case-based learning should in turn become instilled in one's character, which is one's disposition to act.

At the same time, prudence is as much art as science, involving instant pattern recognition, careful consideration of timeliness, and the ability to advance a strategic plan through artful improvisation in high-stress environments. So it is that experienced political actors are prone to say that those outside the arena have no basis for judging those within, and that reports from inside the charmed circle can seem too personalized, driven by idiosyncratic events, or otherwise unsatisfying to scholars attempting to identify law-like continuities in global politics. A third way remains open, however, which is to develop an anatomy of prudential thinking that identifies its distinctively hybrid nature and a provisional repertoire of techniques for assessment and action.

Dimensions of Prudence

Prudential thinking is complex and often difficult, for it requires juggling three different modalities of decision-making that involve, respectively, normative, calculative, and performative criteria.[iv]

The first and most well known dimension of prudence is *normative prudence*. Politics in this sense has to answer to some good, but what defines prudence is that it is a form of reasoning for managing multiple and often incommensurable goods. Normative prudence is not merely using politics on behalf of some good, or even balancing ethics and expediency; rather, it is how one thinks when trying to achieve both security and freedom, human rights and prosperity, foreign markets and domestic revenues, democratic values and reliable allies, etc. This is the problem that Isaiah Berlin announced in his brilliant essay on Machiavelli: "Machiavelli's cardinal achievement is, let me repeat, his uncovering of an insoluble dilemma, . . . his *de facto* recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances or accident or error . . . but (this was surely new) as part of the normal human situation." [v] Politics is essentially the process that emerges when people have to negotiate a radical plurality of goods. Normative prudence thus involves critical comparison of, and decision among, competing paradigms.

The mentality of *calculative prudence* is set out clearly in Aristotle: "Now virtue makes the decision correct; but the actions that are naturally to be done to fulfill the decision are the concern not of virtue, but of another capacity . . . called cleverness, which is such as to be able to do the actions that tend to promote whatever goal is assumed and to achieve it." [vi] Stated simply, the manner of thinking that one uses to determine the end of political action is not sufficient to determine the means to achieve that end. Hence, the political actor needs a second way of thinking, one where the focus is on making valid predictions with a potentially large number of variables. This is the problem of radical contingency. Politics, since it is a form of action, requires knowledge of the world and particularly knowledge of how the world is changing, and in a world that may be competitive and dangerous. That knowledge always will be incomplete, and any action one does take creates an entirely new set of possibilities for everything and everyone affected by that action. Calculative prudence brackets consideration of the good in order to optimize the acquisition of knowledge to make valid predictions about specific actions. This is the way of knowing appropriate to the task of managing the empirical contingencies of the political environment.

The third mode of prudence is often ignored in academic studies of politics. This is not surprising, as *performative prudence* has been a largely intuitive dimension of political action. This is in keeping with its nature: by encompassing the aesthetic dimension of politics, it deals with what is largely tacit; by remaining understated, it can better mediate the tension between the other, more explicit modes of political consciousness. Because prudence is a process of reflection on political action (and not just an ethical theory or a calculation of means), it has to be consistent with the social conventions that make action intelligible at all, and it must persuade people to act in

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specific social situations. Thus, this third mode of prudence focuses on the accomplished performance of one's role. The major representative of this mentality is not Aristotle, but Cicero. "For by 'right' we indicate the perfect line of duty which every one must follow everywhere, but 'propriety' is what is fitting and agreeable to an occasion or person; it is important often in actions as well as in words, in the expression of the face, in gesture and in gait." [vii] This emphasis on appropriate performance depends on manifestly social knowledge – the knowledge of occasions, ceremonies, status, and the like – and it often requires improvisation. Thus, prudence includes a capacity for managing appearances for political effect on behalf of the good life in a style that is known and sustained in a particular community. [viii]

We can summarize these three modes of prudence with the terms *purpose*, *foresight*, and *role*. Prudence requires developing each capability and coordinating them for strategic and tactical effectiveness. Thus, a prudent actor is one who balances incommensurable goods, discerns probable courses of action, and interacts with others in an appropriate and timely manner. Imprudent decisions become more likely when any one mode dominates the others for too long. Then we can observe characteristic pathologies: Normative prudence is prone to moralizing and excessive credulity. Calculative prudence is disposed to isolation, hypertechnicality, and paranoia. Performative prudence is susceptible to forgetting about effects amidst the intrinsic satisfactions of putting on a good show. There are no guarantees, not least when one can misfire on any one of three dimensions or coordinate them poorly.

Even if this parsing of prudential thinking is useful, one drawback may be its analytical symmetry. Prudence is more accumulative or modular than systematic; its model is not the elegant logical argument but rather the commonplace book. Prudence is not about a realm of pure power politics, but rather the messy intersections of politics, society, culture, and whatever else is in play. If actors or observers are to nurture prudence, they need to understand it from the inside. Of course, long experience in the field is one way to do so, but not the only way (why else would Aristotle have written about it?). To get inside prudence, one needs to recognize its basic conditions and modes of articulation, as well as those idioms that have proved useful as guidelines for practical judgment and effective action.

Maxims and Political Action

Whether or not they are power maximizers, prudential actors use a different sort of *maximization*. The pun is dreadful, but perhaps its ugliness will remind us how the use of maxims should not be discredited for being ungainly, incomplete, or otherwise theoretically deficient. Prudence is pragmatics and is embodied in the device of the maxim, which is built for use, and for use by actors who already possess the situational knowledge that needs to be factored into the decision. In the foreign policy environment, important maxims for prudential judgment include the following possible examples. These begin from a traditional realist paradigm but move beyond it to a post-realist mentality more attentive to the complexity of contemporary situational judgment. [ix]

We must be clear, however, that our partial account of a repertoire of pragmatic advice is highly provisional. Our list has been gleaned from our own reading and experience, but the actual expression of these and other forms of practical wisdom will vary considerably across various settings, actors, and observers. Indeed, such is the nature of maxims, aphorisms, adages, quotations, and other short forms. They come from various sources, circulate widely as generic statements, and are applied, adapted, and otherwise inflected through use in specific situations. [x] Detailed analysis of actual usage in representative settings is still called for if prudence is to be properly explicated, and we offer this list as one example of the type of speech and thought that would be the object of inquiry.

1) *Games and Networks – Know all the networks, all the actors, and what they want*

a) Realists define the global system in terms of a competitive game. In a tradition that evokes a game of kings, states are the main players. International relations is a field upon which states interact like billiard balls. States are unitary actors with self-contained identities. Such actors have interests around which they do or should orient their foreign policies. Their interests are defined rather unidimensionally in terms of power. States act to maximize power or at least to minimize power losses.

b) Post-realists, on the other hand, believe that a prudent foreign policy must include a thicker description of a much

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more complex global network, in which there is a heavy helping of cooperation. The game of states is one way, but only one way, to look at this network. Due diligence means accounting for multiple actors with various identities, ideas, and interests, linked through manifold interactions and institutions. These actors can range in scale and aggregation from single individuals, through domestic and international organizations, to global movements.

2) *Hard and Soft Power – Watch all the talk and action*

a) Realists focus on actions, particularly the military actions of hard power. For Mao Tse Tung, power grew out of the barrel of a gun. Stalin, questioning the international importance of the Catholic Church, asked how many military divisions the Pope had at his disposal. Such talk reflects world politics as realists find it; not, they say, as they would like it to be, but as it really is. The world is dangerous, filled with muscular power holders who pose existential threats to states and civilizations. This, for example, is the mainstream Israeli view of Iranian nuclear weapons.

b) Post-realists do not deny the realists' truth. At the same time, they believe that a prudent foreign policy must also take account of more actors, more actions, and more talk: soft power as well as hard. Power has various non-military dimensions, including money, religion, and culture. There are many different power tools in the foreign policy maker's toolkit. Political recognition and exclusion, economic preferences and sanctions, credible commitments, mass and social media messages, for example, can have strong effects. Popular movements through largely non-violent means have changed history. Islam and its leaders are powerful forces in today's world. Whether they have nuclear weapons or not, they can still have a lot of sandals on the ground.

3) *Objective and Subjective – Look for meanings*

a) Realists aim for objectively based theory that is largely context-invariant. The anarchic nature of the international system provides a deep structure that makes particular situations largely irrelevant. As we have said, actors are rational power maximizers. Those who have the power use it, and those who don't must submit. As Thucydides noted, the strong do as they will, while the weak do as they must.

b) Post-realists know that such forces are an important part of the foreign policy equation. But they see more. Prudent foreign policy makers recognize that political actors are meaning makers. They are cognitive and emotional beings, who think in different ways. Metaphors, narratives, and myths importantly shape international behavior. Meanings of international events must be interpreted using not only capabilities, but also perceptions and intentions inferred from this larger set of factors.[xi] Israeli nuclear weapons are seen to have much different meanings and implications than North Korean ones.

4) *Equilibria – Watch your balances*

a) Realists are largely materialists; they focus on balances of capabilities. Intentions, friendship, and enmity can be ephemeral in a world of ever changing coalitions based on currently perceived interests. Actors act, or should act, to produce an equilibrium of material forces such that no present or future hostile power or combination of powers can threaten them. During the 19th century, Britain was known as perfidious Albion because of the way it shifted sides to prevent the domination of continental Europe by other powers. When that was not enough, Britain put additional weights onto the balance. British statesman George Canning famously stated that he called the new world into existence to redress the balance of the old.

b) Post-realists recognize the importance of balancing physical resources. At the same time, they believe that a prudent foreign policy must also search for equilibria in other dimensions. The choice of global partners must also weigh in the balance such concerns as political, legal, ethical, and human rights practices. And the short term must be balanced against the long run. When the United States, for instance, let Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak fall, it did so to support democracy in Egypt. Hopefully a current loss of an important ally would be outweighed by the future gain of a democratic colleague.

5) *Performance and Style – Play your parts*

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a) In the conflictual drama that realists see, performance is essential. Defense and deterrence resources must be properly displayed and communicated to reassure friends and warn enemies.

b) Post-realists believe that a prudent foreign policy requires more complex scripts of talk and action. Different situations require different behavior. Rewards and persuasion can help compel cooperation. As Machiavelli suggested, political leaders must be able to be both lions and foxes. They must be able to play the white keys as well as the black, words and images as well as deeds. And the rituals of traditional diplomacy should be appropriately performed; diplomatic discretion and probity, for example, are at the core of international civility and communication.

6) *Moderation – Bite off what you can chew*

a) A branch of realism, offensive realism, favors advancing power goals whenever possible. At the same time, most realists also tend to believe that a prudent foreign policy is careful. Politics is the art of the possible, and commitments should be commensurate with capabilities. One can always start by trying for more, but sometimes it may be best to minimize losses, or consider the possibilities for maximum gains. Foreign policy should be practical rather than ideological. Possible rewards should be measured against risks. It is not always necessary to push forward. As the French diplomat Talleyrand advised a new young colleague, above all, not too much zeal.

b) Post-realists share much of this view. They may prefer other ends and means, but for post-realists, prudent foreign policy follows an Aristotelian course of moderation. It advances ideals and other goals when possible, but avoids actions based on excessive ambition, pride, or arrogance. It recognizes the pluralism of the complex global network. A prudent foreign policy carefully navigates an uncertain morass of densely inter-connected and opaque global meanings.

These maxims contain embedded themes that might be further elaborated. There are many additional maxims that could be mentioned and developed. Indeed, prudential discourse can articulate endlessly, precisely because it is necessarily applied, provisional, and incomplete. There is no logic of reduction to underlying principles, but rather a process of cycling through available paradigms and means of persuasion as prompted by circumstances. There is not even a secure genre for prudential knowledge. The maxim can become a smug how-to generality rather than a flexible instrument for sophisticated negotiation. Practical wisdom is found not only in maxims but also in stories, quotations, allegorical images, historical analogies, and possibly even in political science textbooks. As the last example suggests, plenty of other material can also be presented in each of these genres, and so once again there are no guarantees that any discursive habit will produce good decisions.

Limitations of Prudence

Maxims are not just the sedimentary remains of past behavior and observation. Some of them may be taken as the evolutionary survival of best practices, adaptive learning of the proven lessons of history as guides to future action. At the same time, there is always debate about the applicability to past cases to current events. The lessons flowing from Allied appeasement of Hitler at Munich and the falling dominoes of Europe have not easily transferred to the jungles, mountains, and cities of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

And stories of failure are also an important part of the practitioner's repertoire for thinking about politics. One deficiency in the academic revival of prudence has been too little attention to its own limitations. As La Rochefoucauld remarked, we praise prudence without stint, but it cannot insure our smallest undertaking. If too much formal rationality can fail to nurture good decision-making, it doesn't follow that a turn toward practice will yield better results. Prudence is a bet that the reflective practitioner will do better than either the intuitive actor or the distant theorist in serving both individual and collective interests, but it is still a bet.

The limitations of prudence are considerable, not least because disastrous decisions can be made by people who pride themselves on being prudent. Other problems include: historically specific alignments with systems of domination such as imperialism; becoming tied to overly cautious conceptions of balance and due deliberation; over-reliance on particular exemplars of good judgment despite changing circumstances; inattention to the close

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relationships between virtues and vices; being subject to the vices that come with self-discipline, experience, authority, not least a lack of empathy for the imprudent; as well as the problems that plague all decision making such as information deficits, information overload, culturally induced blindness, and human stupidity. Indeed, one may consider that the continued reliance on classical texts to discuss prudence is a bad sign: practical wisdom does not seem to have increased much over the millennia. It suggests that prudence is different from scientific inquiry and technical skill, but it also argues for a skeptical approach to progress.

This acknowledgment of the limitations of prudence is not the same as tragic realism. Indeed, prudence is best when it falls short of big ideas and world-encompassing attitudes. Nurturing prudence is about living amidst plurality, not surviving a condition of scarcity. It takes politics very seriously, but more often to get through the week, not to change the world. It does not begin to provide all that is needed for a just, vital polity, but it is the means for sustaining and perhaps improving and widening the political relationships one has. To do this, however, scholars must realize that prudence is a theory of political judgment whose product is not an explanatory model or set of decision rules but rather the reflective practitioner of the art of politics.

Maximizing prudence in the conduct of international relations, then, does not mean optimizing outcomes from a settled body of theoretical knowledge. It does not even need to mean what Herbert Simon called satisficing, settling for satisfactory outcomes. Rather, it may simply be what the British called muddling through. Ordinary maxims—rules of thumb drawn from experience and handed down through generations—may thus be an important guide to disjointed, incremental, and deeply experimental action. Even when they are contradictory (a penny saved is a penny earned—penny wise, pound foolish), different maxims can provide resources for managing different situations. Academic virtues such as doctrinal consistency can be practical vices. Like other forms of prudence, maxims are tools at hand that can help political actors feel their way through the thickets of international relations and point to constructive ways of being in world politics.

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[i] McCourt 2012b.

[ii] See, for example, McCourt 2012a; McCourt 2012b; de Felice and Obino 2012; Brown 2012; Shapcott 2004.

[iii] Hariman and Beer 1998; Hariman 2003.

[iv] This three-part anatomy is drawn from Hariman 2003, pp. 297-302.

[v] Berlin 1972, p. 201.

[vi] Aristotle 1985, 1144a20.

[vii] Cicero, 1962, 71-74.

[viii] Hariman 1995.

[ix] For more on post-realism, see Beer and Hariman 1996; Beer and Hariman, 2004; Beer and Hariman, 2010.

[x] Morson 2011, 2012.

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[xi] Beer, 2001; Beer and De Landtsheer, 2004.

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Beer and Hariman have been partners in a collaboration that began at the Project on Rhetoric of Inquiry at the University of Iowa in 1990. Their work has included *Post-Realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations* and numerous related papers and articles.